

Sister Science – Beyond Asana
Module 2 : Lesson 4
Ayurvedic Herbs

Hi there! Jacky Rae here, co-founder of Yoga Veda Institute & creator of Sister Science™ a course designed to introduce you to the world of Ayurvedic healing.

Today we are going to begin to discuss some prized Ayurvedic herbs. Western medicine is just beginning to discover the health benefits of the herbs that play essential roles in this millennia-old system of healing.

It is important to note that it is absolutely impossible to even scratch the surface of this Ayurvedic herbal tradition in a short lesson such as this. But we will begin to introduce some of the most prized Ayurvedic herbs as well as their properties that you may already be somewhat familiar with.

There's an idea in Ayurveda that, "What heals, also prevents." Herbs effective in treating specific conditions can also serve as a "food," providing targeted nourishment to specific physiological systems and processes. For example, Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), popularized for its anti-inflammatory properties, can also be eaten as a culinary spice by people looking to proactively prevent disease and maintain good health.

As we already know that is not the case with allopathic pharmaceuticals!

Another key Ayurvedic idea is that there is synergy in nature. This is important to keep in mind as we isolate and study the specific constituent compounds in herbs. While it is useful to understand the properties of individual plants, be aware that herbs typically have multiple rather than single effects.

In Ayurveda, as in other systems of Asian medicine, herbs are seldom used in isolation. Rather, they're combined in standardized but individualizable formulas designed to balance and harmonize the properties of the each one of the herbs.

Ayurvedic herbs are used for many reasons: to maintain overall health; to boost immunity; support mental clarity and focus; to calm the nerves; to improve digestion;



to protect the body from toxins and support the detoxification process; and to support innate healing processes.

Today, we are going to talk about six valuable herbs that have long histories of traditional use in Ayurveda.

First on my list, is Ashwagandha. The name of this shrub roughly translates as, “Strength of a horse.” It’s roots have been medicinally used for thousands of years. In classical Ayurveda, the described properties of Ashwagandha include promoting cognitive development, increasing physical strength and muscle recovery as well as being used as a rejuvenator or a substance that extends life and promotes sleep.

Today, Ashwagandha is best known for it’s ability to promote energy and stamina without stimulating the heart. Mainly it can be viewed as a body-balancing herb, that also addresses insomnia.

Preliminary research suggests Ashwagandha may suppress stress-induced changes of dopamine receptors in the brain, which may play a role in the development of chronic anxiety and other similar behaviours.

Ashwagandha has also been shown to increase production of thyroid hormones. As we learn more about the connection between hypothyroidism, cholesterol and diabetes, Ashwagandha may one day play an important role in the management of these inter-related conditions.

The next herb on my list is Bitter Melon. This edible gourd should be every physician’s “go-to” plant for the 16 million or more Americans with high-normal glucose readings or ‘borderline diabetics.

Though we don’t yet have human data corroborating this effect, the animal studies suggest that bitter melon may have a role in reducing cardiovascular risk, particularly in people with diabetes or metabolic syndrome.

The next herb, Holy Basil, also known as Tulsi, is actually considered sacred by many people in India. As such, it can be found growing in temple gardens, where the rich fragrance opens respiratory passages and some say, help the spirit soar.



Holy Basil's key compounds are similar to those found in oregano and it shares the anti-inflammatory and painkilling actions typical of the oregano family.

This plant is also native to West Africa. In Sierra Leone, it is called 'Fever Plant.' The various fixed oil compounds found in the plant have shown extensive antimicrobial and antifungal activity against a variety of pathogens.

In classical Ayurveda, Holy Basil was used as an to clear "excess dampness in the lungs." Recent human trials have validated this, the data showing that this herb can increase lung capacity as well as reduce labored breathing and it acts as a cough suppressant.

It has also been shown to significantly reduce several measures of stress in generalized anxiety disorder patients.

Holy basil can be taken in capsule, tea and in liquid forms.

Another of Ayurveda's true treasures is Turmeric. Consumption of the bright yellow plant was first advocated in millennia past by yogis who claimed it enhanced flexibility and joint integrity. In recent years, a vast amount of research has been done on Turmeric's main components. These compounds have been shown to provide many diverse benefits for human health, including preservation of brain function, high antioxidant activity, regulation of inflammation in conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, and cancer prevention.

Turmeric has been used throughout history for its anti-inflammatory effects. Recent research has shown that it may suppress inflammatory pathways at multiple sites. This means Turmeric can provide a nice anti-inflammatory effect without the gastric complications sometimes seen with other anti-inflammatory agents such as aspirin.

Turmeric has shown unparalleled antioxidant activity. It is interesting to note that routine consumption of Turmeric can significantly increase vitamin E plasma levels within 90 days.

Although much more data is needed to corroborate the suggestion that Turmeric is a cancer preventive, early-stage studies have shown extensive chemopreventive value. It is also a potent growth inhibitor in several tumor cell studies.



The next herb, is called Triphala. A common element in many Ayurvedic protocols, Triphala is not one plant, but three. The Sanskrit word actually means “three fruits,” (tri = three, phala = fruit). This standardized combination has existed in Ayurveda for thousands of years, and as such, it is considered as a single herb.

Use of Triphala is based on a key tenet of Ayurvedic theory, that disease is most able to take hold when digestion is compromised. As such, two major formulas were created to normalize digestion and prepare the groundwork for overall wellness: Triphala and Trikatu (which we will discuss next).

Triphala provides detoxification and digestive correction by promoting peristalsis and providing organ specific anti-inflammatory action in the lower GI tract. Today, Triphala is most commonly used for those with GI complaints such as bloating, sluggish digestion, food sensitivities, fatigue after meals, or chronic constipation.

The Triphala ‘cocktail’ challenges modern scientific investigative methods, since the unique compounds within each fruit seem to take on different attributes when combined, which may not be replicated when the fruits are analyzed separately. In fact, the therapeutic dose of each ingredient can be significantly reduced when formulated together in equal amounts.

Triphala is powerful because each of the three fruits in the formula has remarkable qualities that enable them to cleanse impurities, help with elimination, nurture the body and restore health.

Now - if you know me, you know that I always recommend sourcing Ayurvedic herbs from reputable providers to assure the highest quality.

Maharishi Ayurveda is the company that I use because I have personally used their products as well as spoken directly with their company executives about each of their products. All of their products are third party tested and formulated with the traditional Ayurvedic formula recipes. Their products are expertly made, and for example, their formulation of Triphala, what they call Triphala Plus has an additional ingredient which is Cabbage Rose, which has a cooling effect and supports the synergy of the three fruits. This enhances their benefits, while pacifying Pitta. Again, they only use only the highest-quality ingredients and uphold the authenticity of the Ayurvedic tradition. This way, the full range of benefits indicated in the Vedic texts can be realized.



According to our Vaidyas (Ayurvedic experts), Triphala is the one formula that should be taken to support all your other herbals. By supporting digestion and assimilation, you will derive the greatest possible benefit from food and any herbs you may take.

And Finally, Trikatu. A complimentary formula to Triphala, Trikatu means “three peppers” or “three pungents.” It is a combination of Black Pepper (*Piper nigrum*), Indian Long Pepper (*Piper longum*) and Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*). While Triphala lends a hand to the lower GI tract, Trikatu has its primary effects in the upper GI tract, where it enhances the “digestive fire” necessary for the breakdown of food and absorption of nutrients.

Ayurvedic practitioners consider Trikatu a “warming formula,” used to awaken Agni (digestion) and destroy Ama (accumulated waste & toxins).

According to Ayurvedic theory, poor quality food and inconsistent eating habits can create a dullness to the upper GI, which, if uncorrected, will result in further deviations from overall health. Specifically, it can lead to unhealthy food cravings. This creates a feedback loop, since the poor food choices driven by the cravings reinforce the digestive dysfunction.

Today, we use Trikatu to enhance bioavailability of nutrients, drugs, and supplements, possibly through increasing the production of digestive enzymes. Trikatu also seems to promote the assimilation of food through the intestines and normalizes gastric emptying, thereby reducing the tendency toward flatulence and distention while improving overall energy levels and nutritional status.

In closing, the ancient roots and modern branches of Ayurveda span the very corners of time itself, and it remains a driving force in the world of natural healthcare. It was one of the earliest systems of recorded medicine in the world, and it shows no sign of waning. In fact, it seems to be on the rise in the US and many other parts of the world.

Through powerful formulations and ancient lifestyle tips, Ayurvedic aim is to bring balance to your body and life. It is not disease that creates imbalance; rather, disease is a symptom of imbalance. When we bring our body into a state of equilibrium, its natural state, and maintain this state, the symptom is good health. This is our goal: to help you achieve a state of balance resulting in naturally resilient and good health.



Ayurveda offers a prescription of herbs that are based on the world's oldest holistic wellness system. It is sustainable, using whole plants and authentic ayurvedic ingredients to craft ayurvedic formulations that deliver maximum effect for the mind, body and emotions.

By tuning into our bodies and our very unique needs, we can choose an Ayurvedic formulation that is safe and effective and will support us on our path to balance.

Be sure to pop on over to our Sister Science Facebook group to share your Ayurvedic Herb Insights and practices with our community.

Until next time, I will see you in the next lesson.

